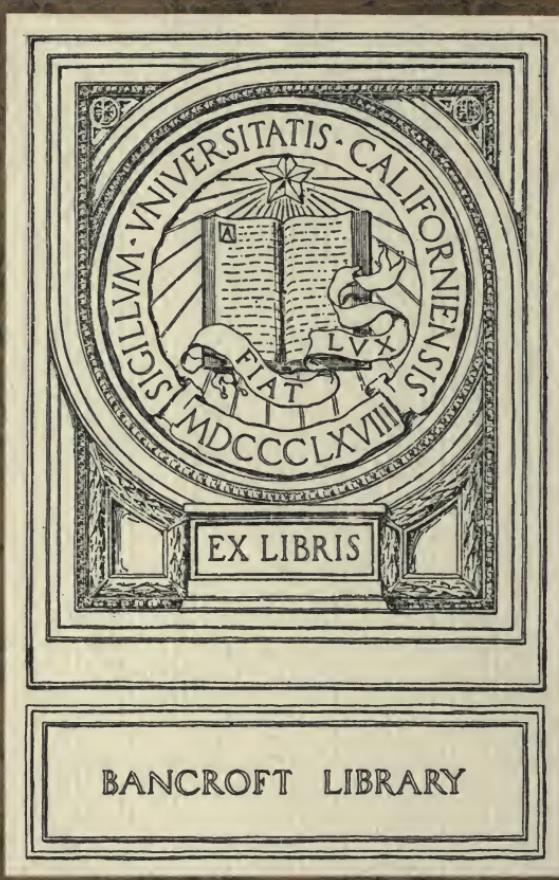


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# THE CAUSES FOR THE FAILURE OF OTERMIN'S ATTEMPT TO RECONQUER NEW MEXICO 1681-1682

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THE CAUSES FOR THE FAILURE OF OTERMÍN'S  
ATTEMPT TO RECONQUER NEW MEXICO, 1681-82

CHARLES W. HACKETT

THE occasion for a discussion of the causes for the failure of Governor Otermín's attempt to reconquer New Mexico in the winter of 1681-82, as well as for a new and intensive study of the broader field of which it is a part, namely, the Pueblo revolt and the reconquest, is the recent acquisition of hitherto unused sources from the Mexican and Spanish archives. These sources, collated with materials in the New Mexico archives, the Bancroft Collection, and the Peabody Museum, cause the whole subject to be seen in a new and different light. In the present paper a meagre sketch of the narrative of the Otermín expedition, the outlines of which are already well known, will be necessary, but emphasis will be laid not only upon the actual causes for the failure of the expedition, but upon some of the most important related facts upon which new light has been thrown.

As a result of the Pueblo uprising in New Mexico in August 1680, in which three hundred and eighty civilians and twenty-one missionaries lost their lives, the survivors, numbering over two thousand five hundred souls, including three hundred and seventeen Indian allies, retreated under the leadership of their governor, Don Antonio de Otermín, to the monastery of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe del Paso. There succor was had for the half-starved, half-naked, and foot-sore refugees, through the kindness of Father Ayeta, the Franciscan *custodio* and *procurador general* of the province, who fortunately had just arrived at El Paso from the city of Mexico with a wagon train of supplies for the missionaries of the province. There a halt was called and temporary settlements were established in the vicinity of Guadalupe del

Paso. At San Lorenzo, one of these settlements located about twenty-five miles below the pueblo of El Paso, headquarters for the governor and for the *cabildo* of Santa Fé were established, and there the provincial form of government was maintained in all of its detail.<sup>1</sup>

In December Father Ayeta went to Mexico City, carrying with him the official records of the revolt and of the retreat, and various petitions from the governor and leading citizens for supplies so that they might attempt a reconquest of the lost province. On January 7, 1681, the *Junta General* began a consideration of the New Mexican situation and by the end of the month had arrived at a decision. The refugees were to be supplied with corn and meat until October 1 at royal expense; grain and implements for farming were to be furnished so that the settlers might become self-sustaining; money was allowed for one hundred and fifty *pobladores*, or settlers, at an annual stipend of two hundred and fifty *pesos* each; fifty soldiers, at the current wage of three hundred and fifteen *pesos* annually, were provided for a presidio, which was to remain at El Paso until the province was reconquered; and last and most important of all, orders were given for Otermín to attempt at once a reconquest of New Mexico so that the refugees might return to their ruined homes. It is thus seen that the settlement of the New Mexico refugees at El Paso was intended to be only temporary. To Father Ayeta the *Junta General* on February 1, 1681, assigned the duty of conducting the relief train to El Paso and of carrying the orders of the superior government to Governor Otermín.<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime conditions at El Paso had been going from bad to worse and before Father Ayeta finally arrived a number of serious dangers had arisen. In March news had come that the Pueblos, allied with the Apaches, were planning to attack El

<sup>1</sup> See Hackett, *The Revolt of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico in 1680*, in *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, vol. 15, pp. 93-147; and *The Retreat of the Spaniards from New Mexico in 1680, and the Beginnings of El Paso*, in *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 16, pp. 137-168, and 259-276.

<sup>2</sup> *Autos tocantes; al Asamiento de Los Yndios de la Provincia de la Nueva Mexico*, folios 92-121. MSS. in the Archivo General y Público de Mexico, Provincias Internas, tomo 37. (See Bolton, *Guide to Materials for the History of the United States in the Principal Archives of Mexico*, 94.) Transcripts of the documents in the above-cited *expediente* are now in the private collection of Dr. Herbert E. Bolton, to whom I am indebted for their use.

Paso, in which they expected to be joined by the Christian Pueblos there and by the native Mansos and Sumas Indians.<sup>1</sup> The supplies furnished by Father Ayeta had only been calculated to last until March 1, 1681, at which time it was thought succor could be had from Mexico City. By April 5, however, no word had come from there and the store of supplies had run so low that unless replenished it could last the settlers only thirty more days. Urgent appeals for help were sent to the governor of Nueva Vizcaya, and foraging expeditions were sent to Casas Grandes and Parral to buy grain and cattle on the credit of the governor's name.<sup>2</sup> In July the Piros and Tigua allies had plans all laid to revolt, kill as many Spaniards as possible and then return to their pueblos; but these plans were discovered in time to be suppressed.<sup>3</sup> Many of the refugees had deserted upon their arrival at El Paso, and in the face of starvation and danger of Indian attacks discontent was so strong that many others left their families in El Paso and went to Casas Grandes, Parral, and other adjacent places in search of individual succor, while others deserted in the full sense of the word. In short, matters were such that Governor Otermín officially recorded his belief that if the situation was not relieved soon El Paso would either have to be abandoned, thereby increasing the risk to all northern New Spain, or the settlers must needs die of starvation.<sup>4</sup>

It was not until September 7, 1681, that Father Ayeta reached San Lorenzo with the belated train of supplies from Mexico City and the orders from the superior government for Otermín to attempt a reconquest of the province. But before his arrival the news that the viceroy and *Junta General* had given instructions for Otermín to lead a military expedition to New Mexico had been received, and an official announcement had been made at both San Lorenzo and the pueblo of El Paso nearly a week before

<sup>1</sup> *Tanto Sacado a la Letra de los autos fulminados de los Indios que Binieron del nuevo merº. llamados Alonso Shimitigua Ballasar y thomas que su Thenor a la letra es Como se Sigue*, folios 1-8. MSS. in the Bancroft Collection.

<sup>2</sup> *Expediente*, No. 4, folios 1-9. Original MSS., in the New Mexico Archives at the Library of Congress. (See Twitchell, *The Spanish Archives of New Mexico*, vol. 2, pp. 3-4.)

<sup>3</sup> *Expediente*, No. 7, folios 1-16 (incomplete) in *ibid.* (See Twitchell, *op. cit.*, 69-70); folios 17-18. These two folios of the *expediente*, having become separated from the rest, are in the Bancroft Collection.

<sup>4</sup> *Expediente*, No. 4, folios 1 and 9, in *ibid.*

the arrival of Father Ayeta.<sup>1</sup> This news was but a signal for a fresh outburst of discord and discontent among the settlers, for after what they had just passed through an expedition to New Mexico proved a most unwelcome subject. Father Ayeta himself best described the general situation. He stated that when he reached Parral on August 2, he heard rumors that the settlers at El Paso had come to regard the reconquest as impossible because additional soldiers were not being sent from Mexico. This, he said, surprised and grieved him, for when he left El Paso the year before he felt that the citizens were so anxious for help to return to a reconquest of their country that to accomplish it they would even be willing to eat stones; that without any doubt the greatest joy in the world would be theirs on the day when the viceroy would supply them with necessities for returning to the proposed reduction.<sup>2</sup> But on the 9th of September, the people having been called together by Otermín, even before the viceroy's despatch had been read to them, "there was not lacking one," so Father Ayeta stated, "to cause difficulties and embarrassments. From which, and from many reports which he received in a short time, he learned that all the sincerest courage, zeal, the promises, and the desires to return to the conquest manifested in Salineta, not only by their mouths but over their signatures, which the superior government holds, had been changed to cold indifference. And he learned that there was no dearth of leading citizens who in place of strength caused weakness. But he did what human strength could to encourage them and he remonstrates with his Lordship for having failed to aid him in carrying the heavy load which he bears as his strength permits. . . . And some being relatives of others and following their leadership, the matter reached such a state that the expense having been incurred, it was seen that it would be most difficult to make the *entrada*. And, were it not that God never permits that there be lacking many good men where there are bad, who promptly and obediently, without replies or metaphysics, enter into the service of the king, due credit being

<sup>1</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes a el alcamiento de los Yndios de La Proua del nuevo Mexico Y la entrada, Y subcesos de ella que se hico para su recuperacion*, folio 62. Transcripts, in Bolton Collection, of MSS. in the Archivo General y Público de Mexico, Provincias Internas, 34. (See Bolton, *Guide*, 92.) Also *Expediente*, No. 8, folio 1, New Mexico Archives. (See Twitchell, *op. cit.*, 70.)

<sup>2</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes*, etc., folio 61.

given to his Lordship who led many out of the error they had been in by his good example, there would have been no *entrada*."<sup>1</sup>

In the face of all this dissatisfaction Otermín the day after the arrival of Father Ayeta began preparations for carrying out the viceroy's orders. A general muster of the citizens and a review of all of their equipment was begun and orders were issued for all deserters to return to El Paso. The aid of the officials of Nueva Vizcaya and Sonora was implored in this matter, but it is worthy of note that not a half dozen of such deserters responded to their governor's call in the two months preceding the departure of the expedition.<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime dissatisfaction at El Paso grew apace and again on September 21, Father Ayeta came to the rescue. Speaking of himself in the third person he says: "It was asked of him that he continue the aid, for if he agreed and continued to give it difficulties would be removed. So he granted anew another 2000 cattle and 2000 *fanegas* of grain in the name of his Majesty." In this way actual opposition to the plans was quieted and the next day the governor began making the payments to the settlers. The following day the list of soldiers for the presidio was made known and the soldiers paid. Ayeta is authority for the statement, however, that the supply money was so placed that the number of dissatisfied settlers exceeded the number of satisfied ones, "an accident," he adds, "which the great prudence of his Lordship overcame and made bearable that the service of their majesties might be accomplished. And for his part his Paternity took all possible precautions, caressing them and petting them, with no slight mortification and disgust, until God wished that they should move."<sup>3</sup>

Finally on November 5 the force left Guadalupe del Paso. On November 7 at the Ancón de Fray García, six leagues above Guadalupe, a general review and muster was held and it was found that there were one hundred and thirty trained soldiers, sixteen raw recruits, one hundred and twelve Indian allies, twenty-eight

<sup>1</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes*, etc., folios 62-63.

<sup>2</sup> *Expediente*, No. 8, folios 1, 33, and 65 in New Mexico Archives. (See Twitchell, *op. cit.*, 70.)

<sup>3</sup> *Expediente*, No. 6, folios 28-30 in New Mexico Archives; *Expediente*, No. 5, folios 1-26 in *ibid.*; *Expediente*, No. 8, folios 34-40, in *ibid.*; *Autos Pertenecientes*, 63.

servants, nine of whom were armed, at least three religious, including Father Ayeta, and one boy, thus making a total of about two hundred and ninety persons. The soldiers carried in all nine hundred and forty-eight horses and mules and the religious doubtless thirty or forty more. The military equipment was deficient in many respects. Excepting Governor Otermín and Francisco Xavier, the Secretary of Government and War, only twenty-five soldiers were provided with complete outfits of personal arms and full cavalry equipment. Thirty-six others carried outfits of personal arms, but were not provided with full cavalry equipment; three possessed complete outfits of personal arms only; thirty-four had a full outfit of personal arms with the exception of a *terno*; and one carried all his personal arms with the exception of a *terno* and a leather jacket. Of the other forty-five one possessed only an arquebus, another only a leather shield, while among the remaining forty-three there were in all fourteen swords, fourteen arquebuses, ten shields (*chimales*), eight leather shields (*adargas*), six daggers, two jackets, four lances and three leather jackets. None of these men possessed more than one of each kind of the above mentioned articles, while only six men possessed as many as four of the articles.<sup>1</sup>

While by this time actual opposition to the expedition had been hushed there was still an almost utter lack of confidence in the success of the undertaking. This is best illustrated by a statement of Otermín himself, made in the *auto* calling for the muster of November 7, to the effect that he believed it would be impossible to succeed on the expedition, which, he said, he was forced to undertake out of deference to his "obligation as a vassal and in order to give just fulfillment to the mandates and orders" of the viceroy and *Junta General*.<sup>2</sup> During the first fourteen or fifteen days of the march the soldiers were tractable, seeing, as Father Ayeta stated, that there was no remedy for it. But as they approached the settled country of the Pueblos even the most meritorious began to fear the first encounter with the Indians.<sup>3</sup> Selecting seventy of the most valorous ones Otermín with them,

<sup>1</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes*, folio 4; *Expediente*, No. 8, folios 65-73, in New Mexico Archives.

<sup>2</sup> *Expediente*, No. 8, folio 65, in New Mexico Archives.

<sup>3</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes*, folio 63.

on December 6, surprised and captured Isleta and soon after received the submission of the entire population, numbering five hundred and eleven souls,<sup>1</sup> and not fifteen hundred and eleven, as Bancroft states.<sup>2</sup>

On the eighth of December Otermín despatched the lieutenant-general of the cavalry, Juan Domínguez de Mendoza, with seventy mounted soldiers and some Indian allies to reconnoiter the country above, while he occupied himself with various duties in Isleta. The Indians above Isleta had heard of the arrival there of the Spaniards and at once had taken to the mountains. Mendoza was gone ten days and advanced as far as La Cieneguilla, passing through the pueblos of Alameda, Puaray, Sandia, San Felipe, Santo Domingo, and Cochiti. At La Cieneguilla parleys were held with the assembled Indians, numbering over one thousand warriors, and peace pacts were made, by the terms of which Mendoza was to allow the Indians three days in which to submit to the Spaniards' rule and return to their pueblos. He and his men then returned to Cochiti to await the expiration of the period. At the end of that time, no Indians having come, it was ascertained through spies and through deserters from the Indian camp that the Indians had only made terms in order to gain time, that warriors from all over the kingdom were flocking to the standard of Catiti, Don Luis Tupatu and other native chieftains, and that there were several well laid schemes to entrap the Spaniards and get rid of them at one fell swoop.

As soon as Mendoza learned this he beat a hasty retreat and the next day joined Otermín's division, which by this time had advanced northward from Isleta and was encamped opposite the pueblo of Alameda, which the governor had already destroyed, together with Puaray and Sandia.<sup>3</sup> It may be remarked in passing that the records kept by Otermín at this time disprove the long accepted theories as to the location of the three above-mentioned pueblos and show conclusively that Alameda was about eight leagues above Isleta and on the same or west side of the stream, that Puaray was one league above Alameda but on

<sup>1</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes*, folios 8 and 101-102.

<sup>2</sup> Bancroft, *Arizona and New Mexico*, p. 188.

<sup>3</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes*, folios 10-57.

the east bank of the river and that Sandia was one league above Puaray and on the same side of the stream.<sup>1</sup>

The return of the Mendoza party with its discouraging reports was the real turning point in the outward policy of the expedition. Whatever had been the half-hearted attitude up to that time there could henceforth be no doubting the keen opposition to remaining in the country. Father Ayeta stated that Otermín, disgusted with the failure of the Mendoza party, determined to select seventy men and go in person to chastise the rebels. To ascertain the general opinion on this point Father Ayeta made a tour of the camp. He found in some of the soldiers "such rebelliousness and in others such arguments" that he realized the hopelessness of the project. "Those who had horses," he added, "looking at nothing but their own convenience, although the sky should fall, would not lend them to their own fathers, much less to the governor." In short, not ten men were found who were willing to accompany the expedition.<sup>2</sup> To discuss the general situation Otermín, on December 23, called a *junta de guerra*.<sup>3</sup> Father Ayeta, the first one of the thirty-one participants to give an opinion, stated emphatically that he did not believe that there was any prospect of Otermín's being able to inflict further punishment on the apostates, and recommended a retreat to Isleta,<sup>4</sup> so that that pueblo might be safeguarded until a decision could be reached. With Father Ayeta, who had done so much to inspire the soldiers for the undertaking, discouraged, there could be little hope for further efforts at reconquest. In the discussion that followed emphasis was laid on the fact that the unusually hard winter had so exhausted the horses that many soldiers were doing scout duty on foot; that the Isleta Indians were deserting and returning to apostasy while those loyal to the Spanish cause were liable to be attacked by the rebels; and that the place where they were was unsuited for defense, and short of firewood. The majority voted to retreat for the present to Isleta. Four voted to continue the *entrada* and three were in favor of leaving for San Lorenzo at once. Otermín, as can be imagined, yielded to public

<sup>1</sup> See Hackett, *The Location of the Tigua Pueblos of Alameda, Puaray, and Sandia in 1681*, in *Old Santa Fé*, vol. 2, pp. 381-391.

<sup>2</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes*, folios 63-64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, folio 64.

opinion and ordered a retreat to Isleta, where his force arrived on December 30. The next day another *junta* was held, and it was unanimously agreed to retreat at once to El Paso. Isleta was burned as were all of the other pueblos visited except San Felipe, Santo Domingo, and Cochiti, and on January 2 the force began its march down the river.<sup>1</sup>

In summing up the achievements of the expedition little can be said. A distance of more than a hundred and twenty-five leagues had been traversed. Five hundred of the sixteen thousand apostates had been absolved and received again into the church, although over one hundred of these had apostasized again during the Spaniards' absence. Eight pueblos, including Isleta, which was the only one that was not found deserted, had been burned, and with them a quantity of grain estimated at four thousand *fanegas*. Three other deserted pueblos had been sacked and a great quantity of beans and other things consumed. Only one encounter with the Indians is recorded and this was at Isleta, the only pueblo as far south as the Piros country which did not participate in the revolt of the preceding year. There the natives only let fly a few arrows, for, being attacked at daybreak, they were unable to ascertain who the invaders were, and at first took them to be Apaches. The offensive operations of the Mendoza party, as we have seen, amounted to nothing. In short it is worthy of comment that the death, or even the wounding, of not a single person on either side is noted.

What then can be assigned as the cause for so little having been accomplished on so long an expedition? The actual opposition encountered before the expedition set out, the lack of confidence in the undertaking from the governor down, even from the very beginning, and the unwilling resignation to the inevitable on the part of the soldiers on the march could only presage an unsuccessful expedition. Under such conditions there could have been little hope for overcoming such trials and discouragements as were caused by the severe weather, the failure of the horses, and the flight of the Indians to the mountains rather than surrender, while a vigorous offensive campaign against the apostates was out of the question.

<sup>1</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes*, folios 65-95.

That such a campaign was possible, however, and that the failure of the expedition was not regarded by the officials as due to a scarcity of men and equipment was pointed out in no uncertain terms by the royal fiscal in Mexico City later on. His review of the expedition is interesting and altogether enlightening. He says in part: "In the pueblos which were set on fire more than 4000 *fanegas* of grain were burned, besides a great quantity of beans. And it must be noted that this quantity did not include that which the carts and pack train carried and that which they threw to the animals; that in the pueblos of Cochiti, San Felipe, San Ildefonso, Santa Ana, and Sia, there was a great quantity of grain and other supplies, as the lieutenant-general, Juan Domínguez, related in those letters of which mention has been made; that at least there might have been collected another 4000 *fanegas*, which he left to the enemy, and likewise the houses of the above-mentioned pueblos, without having set fire to them. And it seems that if the governor had ordered that all of said grain should be collected in the pueblo of Puaray, which is in the central part and at a short distance from the others, he could have made himself secure in it, having plenty of grain to sustain his force, and to feed to the horses and mules at night, taking them out during the day to feed in the fields, for in his letters the lieutenant informed him that on both sides of the river the feed and stubble was more than good in that vicinity. And having finished gathering in the crop of corn there could not fail to have been a large quantity of husks and stalks of the corn itself, equally good feed for the horses and mules. In this way it would have been possible to maintain the army many months in the said pueblo, which is in the central part of the province and from ten to twelve leagues distant from the villa of Santa Fé. And the apostates being in the sierras during the snowy season, without houses, and with few provisions, the discomforts of cold and hunger would have reduced them to the necessity of submission, while the cause for the weakness of the horses, which was the main pretext for the retreat, would have been removed, since with a few days of rest and feeding on corn they would have been fatter and stronger than when they left the camp of San Lorenzo. And the other pretext, that the surrendered Indians in Isleta were

in danger, vanishes because of the ease with which they could have been taken with the army to the said pueblo of Puaray where they would be more secure than left alone as they were in Isleta, merely on the strength of their word and with the power of carrying away the many provisions which they had there.

"And when their safety is doubted that doubt may be dispelled by what persons experienced in Indian warfare say, for example will not be found in all New Spain where Indians have dared to offer battle to so many persons as the army numbered, mounted, provided with arms and ammunition, and intrenched in a pueblo, nor even to attack those with less defence unless it were by surprise. For it continually happens that twenty armed men with powder and munitions, make thousands of Indians retreat although it may be in the open country. And when anyone attempts to deny this pure and notorious truth, laying aside many other examples to prove it, that will be sufficient which the governor himself experienced in the villa of Santa Fé. For notwithstanding that all the apostates had been called together for the uprising, and that this news had caught him unawares and without any preparation to resist such a general assemblage, and the Indians, being so wrought up that in all of the other pueblos of that district they had already killed the priests and all the Spaniards, without sparing the children and women, yet the said governor, having placed himself in defense with only one hundred men who could bear arms, not only repelled the attack of such a multitude of Indians as had surrounded him, but, having repulsed them, put them to flight, killing more than three hundred, besides forty-seven others whom they caught in a house where they killed them with lances. And seeing that his lieutenant-general in Rio Abajo, Alonso García, was not giving him aid, he decided to leave, retiring with his followers from the said villa of Santa Fé, as he did, the greater part of them coming on foot and burdened with women and children and the necessary supplies. And with only one hundred horses he came retreating through the same pueblos of Sandia, Alameda, and Isleta, where the apostates had risen. In this way, with very few supplies, and in sight of the enemy who followed them, revealing themselves on the hills and ridges, he marched to the place called Fray Cristóbal, which is distant from

the villa and capital of Santa Fé, from where they set out, seventy leagues, without the apostates having dared to give him battle in all this distance with its very narrow passes, nor to come upon them, in spite of the fact that they [the Indians] had a great number of horses, and some guns, powder, and ammunition, which they had taken from the Spaniards.

"And, if on that occasion, when they were so disordered and were travelling on foot and with so great a number of women and children, and the few horses which they were bringing lean, on account of having been shut up the nine days that they were besieged, the Indians did not dare to attack them, even when they passed through the same pueblos, then it is clearly demonstrated that if those who were of the opinion that the army should retire would recall this event they would find all the motives with which they upheld the retirement to have vanished. For, in order to maintain themselves in the pueblos referred to they had the supplies in them which have already been mentioned; with eight hundred and fifty horses and other animals; provided with arms and munitions and without women and children to defend; and the apostates in the woods and mountains in the season of much snow, burdened with a whole rabble and with very few provisions; so that it was very likely not only that it could maintain itself but also that the rebels would necessarily have to surrender. Meanwhile they could have sent for aid to El Paso, Casas Grandes, and Parral for their greater security.

"Comparing then, the forces and supplies with which the governor retired at the time of the uprising with those which are found in his second retreat the great difference will be recognized. And if the enemy then did not have the boldness to attack him they would have less boldness now, seeing our men better provided and in greater number. And it is not reasonable that there should have been horses and mules able to retreat more than one hundred and thirty leagues and yet insufficient and too lean to go back to burn the pueblos of San Felipe, Santo Domingo, and Cochiti, and the provisions which were in them, which duty the lieutenant-general Juan Domínguez de Mendoza had failed to execute. For it is only six leagues, and from ten to twelve to the villa of Santa Fé, from the pueblo of Sandia where the

retreat was begun, thereby frustrating the recovery of that kingdom which they had so well under way that it was certain of success if he had maintained himself in the said pueblos.”<sup>1</sup>

Such, in support of the above conclusions, was the opinion of the royal fiscal, when, upon the receipt of the official *autos* kept by Governor Otermín, he made a report to the viceroy.

<sup>1</sup> *Autos Pertenecientes*, folios 116-118.





